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THE MAN WHO WALKED LIKE A HERON

Nneka Solomon

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The man came at the hour when the lake holds its breath. Not dawn, not dusk, but the seam between them, that thin place where the water turns to mercury and the fish dream backward. He did not arrive by road or boat. He simply appeared, as though the baobab trees had coughed him out from their hollow bellies, or the termite mounds had split open like mouths.

Wamwayi saw him first, because Wamwayi saw everything.

This was her curse and her gift. At twelve years old, with braids that swung like pendulums when she ran, she could tell you how many scales were on a bream from twenty paces. She could read the weather in the cough of an old man. She had once drawn a

picture of a stranger who passed through Mphanda, and three weeks later that stranger was arrested in Blantyre for a crime no one knew he had committed. The police asked how she knew his face. She said, "I did not know his face. I knew his loneliness."

So when she saw the man standing at the edge of the cassava field, she did not run. She tilted her head, the way her grandmother taught her, like a bird deciding whether a snake is friend or food.

He was tall. Too tall. His legs were long as herons' legs, his neck thin as a reed. He wore grey linen that drank the twilight instead of reflecting it. His skin was the colour of old parchment, the kind her grandfather used to wrap tobacco leaves. And his eyes, his eyes were shallow graves. No grief, no joy. Just two holes where something had been and was no longer.

"Child," he said.

Not in Chichewa. Not in English. In a tongue that slid under her ribs like a fishhook, a language that had no name but felt like the memory of a dream. She understood him perfectly.

"You are lost," she said.

He smiled. His teeth were white as fish bones bleached by the sun. “No. I am exactly where I need to be.”

“The village is that way.” She pointed north, where the smoke from cooking fires made grey braids against the purple sky. “If you need food, Agogo Miri will give you nsima. If you need work, the fishermen are lazy and will pay anyone with a pulse.”

“I do not need food. I do not need work.” He crouched, bringing his face level with hers. He smelled of dust and old paper. “I need a child who can see.”

Wamwayi’s heart knocked against her ribs like a trapped bird. But her voice did not shake. “See what?”

“Everything.”

She looked at him for a long time. The lake breathed behind them. A fish jumped, and the sound was a small applause.

“I am drawing a picture of you right now,” she said. “In my head. I am drawing your long neck and your empty eyes and your grey clothes. I am drawing the way you stand like you are waiting for a train that will never come.”

The man's smile widened. "Then you are the one."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small notebook, the kind schoolchildren use, with a blue cover and a broken spine. He handed it to her. Inside, on the first page, was a drawing. Not done by a child. Done by a hand that had learned to draw in places where mistakes cost lives.

It was a map. Hills, a fig tree, an old mission station, and a circle with a symbol inside it. A symbol Wamwayi did not recognise but that made her stomach clench as though she had swallowed a stone.

"What is this?" she whispered.

"Something that was buried before you were born," the man said. "Something that must not be found. But someone is looking for it. And I need to know who."

"Why me?"

"Because children are invisible. And you, Wamwayi ...you are more invisible than most."

He knew her name. She had not told him her name. The fishhook under her ribs twisted.

That was the last time anyone saw Wamwayi alive.

Or so they thought.

The mouths of the village

The village was called Mphanda, which meant "the place of crossing." For generations, people had crossed through it, fishermen with silver bream strung on reeds, traders carrying salt from the north, spirits who walked the paths at midnight, and lies. So many lies that the earth itself had grown thick with them.

The lake lapped against its eastern flank, a patient witness. It had seen everything and told nothing. The hills rose behind it like clenched fists, guarding the secrets of the dead.

When Wamwayi did not return home by nightfall, her grandmother, Agogo Miri, did not panic. She was seventy-three years old and had buried two

husbands, three children, and a goat she had loved more than any of them. Panic was a luxury for the young. Instead, she lit a kerosene lantern and walked the path to the well.

The well was the heart of Mphanda. Women gathered there in the evenings, their buckets clanking, their tongues loosened by the day's exhaustion. They talked about marriages and miscarriages, about who had cheated whom in the fish market, and about the strange sounds coming from the old mission station at night.

"Have you seen my granddaughter?" Agogo Miri asked.

The women looked at one another. Mrs Banda, the tomato seller, shifted her weight. "She was at the cassava field. Around three."

"Alone?"

"No." Mrs Banda lowered her voice, though there was no one within a hundred metres to overhear. "There was a man. Tall. Dressed like a pastor but with no cross."

Agogo Miri's hand tightened on the lantern. "What did he want?"

"I did not ask. I am not a fool."

The other women nodded. Not a fool. In Mphanda, asking questions was the first step toward becoming an answer.

Agogo Miri walked to the shebeen next. The shebeen was Esther's domain, a dark, cool hut with plastic chairs and a radio that played hymns during the day and dance music after the children slept. Esther was a large woman with a laugh like gravel and arms that had wrestled more than one drunk man to the ground.

"Esther. Have you seen Wamwayi?"

Esther was wiping glasses with a rag that had once been white. She did not look up. "The whole village has seen her, Agogo. She was talking to that man like he was an uncle. Laughing. Showing him something in a notebook."

"What notebook?"

"The one she draws in. The blue one."

Agogo Miri's heart, which had survived seventy-three years without breaking, cracked a little. That

notebook was Wamwayi's soul. She never let anyone touch it. Not even her grandmother.

"Did she leave with him?"

Esther finally looked up. Her eyes were soft, which was rare. "I did not see. But Dinala saw. Ask the headman."

Dinala Chisale, the village headman, lived in a brick house with a tin roof, the only one in Mphanda. He was a proud man, with a belly that spoke of too much *nsima* and a voice that spoke of too much authority. He was also, secretly, a coward. Agogo Miri had known this since he was a boy and had run from a bee.

"Dinala."

He was sitting on his veranda, drinking cloudy *maheu* from a calabash. He did not invite her to sit.

"Agogo. I heard."

"What did you hear?"

"That the girl is gone." He took a long sip. "These things happen. Children run. They go to the lake.

They drown. Or they go to the city and become prostitutes."

Agogo Miri's hand shot out and snatched the calabash from his grip. She poured the *maheu* onto the ground. The earth drank it greedily.

"You will speak of my granddaughter with respect, or I will tell the village about the night you wet yourself during the cyclone of '98."

Dinala's face reddened. "Fine. I saw her. She walked with the man toward the old mission. She was not crying. She was not tied. She went freely."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone. The girl too."

"And you did nothing?"

"What was I to do? He was a foreigner. Foreigners have papers. They have embassies. If I touched him, I would be in jail and my family would starve."

Agogo Miri stared at him. She had no words. For the first time in her long life, the well of her tongue was dry.

By dawn, the news had grown teeth.

Someone said Wamwayi had been seen walking with the stranger toward the old mission station and that the mission station was built on a mass grave. Someone else said she had boarded a boat with Chinese men, and the boat had no lights, and the lake had swallowed it whole. A third voice, lower and venomous, whispered that she was not a child at all but a *chibwibwi*, a night dancer and that the stranger was her handler, calling her home to a coven that met under the baobab tree every full moon.

"You are a wicked people," Agogo Miri said to the assembly that gathered in the square. Her voice was dry grass. "You do not know her. You know only the shape of your own hunger. You are hungry for tragedy because your own lives are small. You want her to be dead so you can weep and feel important."

Mrs Banda crossed her arms. "And you want her to be alive so you don't have to admit she ran away from you."

The slap came before anyone saw it. Agogo Miri's palm connected with Mrs Banda's cheek, and the sound echoed off the tin roofs like a gunshot.

"I will kill you," Agogo Miri said calmly, "if you speak again."

No one spoke.

But the village had tasted the sweet rot of speculation, and it would not stop chewing.

The spy who came for Cassava

Chikondi Phiri was not a spy. He was a fisherman who hated fish.

At thirty-four, he had the weary eyes of a man who had seen the underside of too many boats and the underside of too many governments. He lived alone in a hut patched with election posters from 2014, when a man with a gold-toothed smile had promised to drain the swamp and had instead filled it with crocodiles. His only luxury was a shortwave radio that picked up strange stations, voices from Kinshasa, from Maputo, from the ghost frequencies of the Cold War, where dead spies spoke to each other in codes that no one remembered.

He had come to Mphanda fifteen years ago, with a fake name and a real limp. He told everyone he had been a driver for a mining company in the north, that a rockfall had crushed his leg, and that the company had gone bankrupt and forgotten to pay him. He told no one that the limp was from a bullet, or that the mining company had never existed, or that his real name was not Chikondi at all but something longer and harder to pronounce, with a country attached to it that no longer appeared on maps.

He fished because fishing required no questions. He sold kapenta to Esther's shebeen and kept his mouth shut. He watched. He listened. He remembered.

And he remembered Wamwayi.

The girl had come to him six months ago, sitting on the rocks by the lake while he mended his nets. She had not spoken for a long time. Then she had said, "You are not a fisherman."

He had laughed. "What am I, then?"

"A man who is hiding."

His hands had stopped moving. "What makes you say that?"

She had pulled out her blue notebook and shown him a drawing. It was him. But not the him he showed the village, the stooped, limping, fish-smelling him. It was a younger him, standing straight, wearing a uniform he had burnt in a fire fifteen years ago. The drawing had a gun in his hand, a radio in his ear, and a look on his face that he recognised with a jolt: the look of a man who had just decided to disappear.

"How did you draw this?" he had whispered.

"I see the shape under the shape," she had said. "Everyone has a ghost inside them. I just draw the ghost."

He had wanted to grab her, to shake her, to tell her to forget. But he had done none of those things. Instead, he had said, "Keep that drawing safe. Do not show anyone."

She had nodded. "I know. Secrets are heavy. But someone has to carry them."

Now she was gone. And the ghost he had been trying to bury was clawing its way out of its grave.

Three days after Wamwayi vanished, a man in a blue UN vest appeared at the village meeting. He was tall, with a shaved head, a clipboard, and a smile that

did not reach his eyes. He introduced himself as Mr Okonkwo. He spoke Chichewa with a Nigerian accent that made the villagers smile despite themselves.

"Good afternoon, good people of Mphanda. I am here from Lilongwe. A very small matter. A routine enquiry." He held up a sketch. "Has anyone seen a foreigner matching this description?"

The sketch showed a man with a long neck. Grey clothes. Eyes like shallow graves.

Chikondi, standing at the back of the crowd, felt his spine turn to ice.

The villagers murmured. Yes, they said. Yes, we saw him. He was here. He was talking to the missing girl.

"Ah," said Mr Okonkwo. "The missing girl. Yes. That is connected. Please, any information about her as well."

"What did the man do?" asked a woman in the crowd.

Mr Okonkwo's smile flickered, like a candle in a draught. "He is a person of interest in a matter of regional security. That is all I can say. Please, if you see him, do not approach. Contact me directly." He

handed out cards with a phone number. No name. Just a number.

That night, Chikondi did not sleep. He sat by his shortwave radio, twisting the dial through static and ghosts. At 7100 kHz, a voice cut through the hiss. It was a woman's voice, flat and professional, speaking English with an accent he could not place.

"Heron has landed. Repeat, Heron has landed. Confirm retrieval of Package W. Over."

A pause. Then a man's voice, tired, impatient.

"Heron is not responding. Last known location: Mphanda. Package W: unconfirmed. Suggest ground team. Over."

"Ground team is three days out. Can you wait?"

"The lake will not wait. Neither will the package. Heron is either compromised or dead. Over."

Chikondi turned off the radio.

He sat in the darkness. His heart beat a rhythm he had not felt since his last mission, a slow, deliberate drum, the drum of a man who knows he is about to do something stupid and does it anyway.

He lit a cigarette. The flame illuminated his face, and for a moment, he looked exactly like the man in Wamwayi's drawing.

"Wamwayi," he whispered. "What did you see?"

The gossip market

The next morning, the village square became a court without a judge, a pulpit without a preacher, a stage without a script.

The gossip began at first light, when Mrs Banda opened her tomato stall and declared that she had dreamed of Wamwayi the night before. In the dream, the girl was floating face-down in the lake, and her hair had turned into water snakes.

"That is not a dream," said Mr Jere, the bicycle repairman, who was missing three fingers and claimed he had lost them to a crocodile (in truth, he had lost them to a faulty chain). "That is a message from the ancestors. The girl is dead."

"She is not dead," countered Esther, who had arrived with a bucket of *maheu* and a scowl. "She is hiding. I know these things. When I was a girl, I ran away twice. Once for three days. My mother beat me so hard I could not sit for a week."

"You are not Wamwayi," said Mrs Banda. "You were always trouble. That girl is quiet. Quiet ones do not run. They are taken."

Esther slammed the bucket down. "And who took her? You? You were at the well when she disappeared. You saw the man and did nothing. Maybe you helped him."

Mrs Banda's face went red. "I did not... how dare you..."

"I dare because I have no fear of tomatoes," Esther said, and the crowd laughed despite themselves.

The laughter died when Dinala the headman stepped forward. He was wearing his ceremonial cloth, the one with the faded pattern of President Banda's face. He looked important, which meant he was about to say something unimportant.

"I have decided," Dinala announced, "to form a search party. Six men. We will go to the old mission

station and the hills. We will find the girl or we will find the truth."

"And what will you do with the truth?" asked a voice from the back.

It was Agogo Miri. She had not slept. Her eyes were red, but her back was straight. She held her grandson's hand, a boy of seven, Wamwayi's cousin, who did not understand why everyone was shouting.

Dinala puffed out his chest. "The truth will be brought to the chief. The chief will bring it to the police."

"The police," Agogo Miri repeated. "The same police who took three weeks to investigate the murder of Mrs Phiri's goat? The same police who said the rapist who attacked the girl from Chikwawa was 'just a man with needs'?"

The crowd went quiet. Those were dangerous words. Words that could get a person arrested.

Dinala's face hardened. "Agogo, I respect you. But you are old and you are scared. Let the men handle this."

"Let the men handle this," Agogo Miri mimicked, her voice high and mocking. "Men handled the war. Men handled the famine. Men handled the cholera outbreak. And now a child is missing, and the men are going to the old mission station to poke sticks at the ground and call it an investigation."

She stepped closer to Dinala. She was shorter than him by a head, but she seemed to grow taller with every word.

"You will not find her, Dinala. Because you are not looking for her. You are looking for a story to tell. You want to come back with a body or a confession so you can be the hero. But if she is alive, you will not find her. Because she is hiding from you. All of you. You and your gossip and your pointing fingers and your hungry mouths."

Dinala opened his mouth to respond, but Esther spoke first.

"She is right," Esther said. "We have been talking and talking, and we have done nothing. The girl has been gone for three days. Three days! A child can walk to Lilongwe in three days. A child can die in three hours. And we are here, arguing about tomatoes."

She picked up her bucket of *maheu* and raised it high. “I am going to the hills. Not to find a story. To find a child. Who is coming?”

For a moment, no one moved. Then Mr Jere stepped forward, missing fingers and all. Then a young fisherman named Chimwemwe. Then three women who had said nothing but had heard everything.

And then, quietly, without announcing himself, Chikondi Phiri picked up his machete and joined them.

Dinala watched them go. His mouth opened and closed like a fish on dry land.

“Fine,” he muttered to no one. “Go. Get eaten by hyenas. See if I care.”

But he cared. He cared very much. Because if they found the truth before he did, his authority would crack like dry earth. And a headman without authority was just a man with a big belly and a tin roof.

The body at the crossing

They found her on the fourth day.

No. They found him.

Chimwemwe the fisherman saw the bundle first. He had separated from the group to check his fish traps, old habits and had paddled his dugout into a small inlet near the old mission station. The inlet was choked with reeds and lily pads, a place where the lake grew still and dark, as though it were thinking.

The bundle was wrapped in a blue *chitenje*, the kind sold at the market for 1,500 kwacha. It was tied with rope, the same rope the fishermen used for their

nets. And it was floating, just barely, kept from sinking by the air trapped in its folds.

Chimwemwe did not touch it. He had seen a dead body once before, during the cyclone, and he remembered the weight of it, how a person, emptied of life, felt more like a sack of sand than a human being. He rowed back to shore. He rowed fast. And when his feet touched dry land, he ran.

He found Esther first. She was sitting on a rock, fanning herself with a banana leaf, complaining about the heat and the mosquitoes and the stupidity of men who did not bring enough water.

'Esther,' he panted. 'There is something in the water.'

'Fish,' she said. 'Everything in the water is fish.'

'Not fish. A bundle. Wrapped in cloth. Tied with rope.'

Esther stopped fanning. She stood up. 'Show me.'

They went together. Esther waded into the inlet up to her thighs, her skirt floating around her like a dark flower. She pulled the bundle toward her. It was heavy. Too heavy for cloth and air.

She untied the rope. She unfolded the *chitenje*.

And then she screamed.

It was not Wamwayi.

It was a man. A white man, or perhaps not white—his skin was the colour of old parchment, the same parchment Agogo Miri's grandfather had used for tobacco. He wore grey linen, now stained with lake mud and something darker. His neck was long, too long, and it was broken, bent at an angle that suggested a fall from a great height, or a deliberate twist, or the work of hands that knew exactly where to press.

The man had no shoes. His feet were pale and soft, like a baby's.

And in his pocket, tucked carefully, as though he had known he would be searched, was a photograph.

Esther pulled it out with trembling fingers. It showed Wamwayi, smiling, holding her blue notebook open to a page. The page was covered in drawings, not of fish or trees or houses, but of symbols. Circles. Arrows. Coordinates. And one word, written in careful capitals: PAKATI.

The centre.

Esther stared at the photograph. Then she stared at the dead man. Then she looked at Chimwemwe, who was vomiting into the reeds.

'Go,' she said. 'Go to the village. Tell them. Tell everyone.'

'Tell them what?'

'Tell them the stranger is dead. And Wamwayi is not in the lake.'

'How do you know?'

Esther looked at the photograph again. At the girl's smile. At the notebook. At the word PAKATI.

'Because she is not a victim,' Esther said. 'She is a messenger. And someone killed him to stop her from delivering the message.'

The spy's confession (half of it)

The village erupted.

By the time the sun set on the fourth day, every person in Mphanda had a theory. The body had been carried to the church, because the pastor refused to let it rot in the open. Men and women filed past, staring at the long neck, the broken angle, the grey clothes.

"She killed him," whispered a woman.

"He killed her and then threw himself into the lake, but the lake rejected him," whispered a man.

“The lake killed him, because the lake does not suffer strangers who come with empty hands,” whispered an old man who had spent too many nights listening to the waves.

Mr Okonkwo arrived within the hour. He came in a black SUV with tinted windows, driven by a man in sunglasses even though the sun was going down. He did not look surprised when he saw the body. He did not look sad. He looked like a man who had opened a package and found exactly what he expected.

He took the photograph from Esther. He examined it. He folded it carefully and put it in his own pocket.

“Thank you for your assistance,” he said. “I will take the body now.”

“Where?” asked the pastor.

“To Lilongwe. For an autopsy.”

“And the girl?”

Mr Okonkwo’s smile flickered. “We are looking for her.”

He turned to leave. But Chikondi was standing in his path.

"Fisherman," Okonkwo said. "Move."

"You knew him," Chikondi said. It was not a question.

Okonkwo's eyes narrowed. "What did you say?"

"The dead man. You knew him. You called him Heron. On the radio. 7100 kHz."

The village went silent. Even the lake seemed to hold its breath.

Okonkwo took a step closer to Chikondi. His smile was gone. "Who are you?"

"A fisherman who hates fish."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the only one you will get."

For a long moment, the two men stared at each other. The village watched. Esther held her breath. Agogo Miri, who had arrived at the church just in time to hear the exchange, clutched her grandson's hand.

Then Okonkwo laughed. It was a dry, hollow sound, like stones rattling in a can. "You are a brave fool. I will give you that."

He leaned close to Chikondi, so close that their foreheads almost touched. His breath smelled of mint and deception.

"The heron is dead," he whispered. "But Package W is still missing. You know something, fisherman. I can see it in your eyes. You have been running for fifteen years, and you have finally stopped. But running does not erase what you were."

Chikondi did not flinch. "What was I?"

"A collector of secrets. Like me. Like the heron." Okonkwo's voice dropped to a murmur. "Find her before my people do. Before the wrong people do. Because there are worse things than death, fisherman. There are weapons that do not explode. They whisper. And they have been whispering under this village for forty years."

He stepped back. He gestured to his driver. Together, they lifted the body of the heron and carried it to the SUV. The door slammed. The engine started. The black vehicle disappeared into the dusk, leaving behind a cloud of red dust and a silence heavier than any scream.

Then everyone turned to Chikondi.

"Who are you?" Esther asked.

Chikondi looked at her. At Agogo Miri. At the villagers, their faces hungry for an answer, any answer, as long as it was juicier than the truth.

He sighed. "I was a spy. Fifteen years ago. For a country that no longer exists."

"Which country?" asked Mr Jere.

"The one in the space between maps. The one you read about in newspapers and forget by breakfast."

"And the heron?"

"A broker. He traded in children. Not for labour. For information. Children see things adults don't. They remember. They draw. He took them across borders and listened to what they had seen."

The crowd gasped. Agogo Miri's face went pale as ash.

"What did Wamwayi see?" she whispered.

Chikondi closed his eyes. "A missile. In the hills. Three weeks ago. A weapon that was not supposed to be here. But that is not all."

“What else?”

He opened his eyes. They were wet.

“The missile was empty. The real thing, the thing everyone is looking for, is smaller. A cylinder. Buried under the fig tree at the old mission. And it does not explode. It infects.”

“Infects with what?” demanded Esther.

“A plague,” said Chikondi. “Forty years old. Buried by a regime that wanted to hide its crimes. And now, someone wants to open it.”

The lake breathed. The village did not.

The hills have teeth

Chikondi left before dawn.

He took a machete, a torch, a small pouch of dried kapenta, and the photograph of Wamwayi—which he had stolen from Mr Okonkwo's pocket during their whispered conversation, because old habits do not die, they only sleep.

He did not tell anyone where he was going. But the village knew. In Mphanda, a man walking toward the hills at dawn with a machete and a guilty face was a man saying goodbye. Some of the women wept.

Some of the men pretended not to notice. Agogo Miri stood at the edge of the path and watched him go, her hands folded, her lips moving in a prayer that had no words.

The hills were old. Older than the lake, older than the stories, older than the plague. They were thick with miombo trees whose bark peeled like sunburned skin. The paths were overgrown, because no one went to the hills anymore, not since the old mission had been abandoned, not since the whispers had started.

Halfway up the eastern slope, Chikondi found the first sign: a child's hair tie, yellow, knotted around a thorn bush. He recognised it. Wamwayi wore it on Sundays, when she went to church with her grandmother. It was the only time she bothered to tie her hair.

He knelt and touched the hair tie. It was still damp with dew. She had passed this way recently. Very recently.

He followed the trail. Broken twigs. A footprint too small for an adult, too light to be a man. A discarded water bottle with a label in Arabic, the same label he had seen on bottles in refugee camps, in war zones,

in places where children drank from plastic because the wells were poisoned.

At noon, he found the camp.

Two tents, khaki green, pitched in a clearing hidden by a curtain of hanging vines. A satellite phone on a folding table. Three rifles leaning against a tree, AK-47s, old but well-maintained. A fire pit with cold ash. And in the middle, sitting on a log, drawing a picture of a baobab tree with a pencil stub, was Wamwayi.

She looked up. She was dirty. Her braids had come undone, and her dress was torn at the shoulder. But her eyes were clear, and her hand was steady, and when she saw Chikondi, she smiled.

"Chikondi," she said. "You are late."

He almost laughed. He almost wept. He did neither. He crouched in front of her and took her hands. "Are you hurt?"

"They gave me biscuits. And they are not bad men. They are just afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

She held up her drawing. It showed the baobab tree, yes, but also the fig tree from her earlier drawing. And the missile. And the cylinder. And a second cylinder, smaller, with a symbol that Chikondi recognised immediately, a circle divided into three wedges, the international symbol for biohazard.

"There are two," she said. "Not one. The heron only knew about one. But the men in the camp, the grave keepers, they have been watching both. For forty years."

A voice came from behind him. Young. Tense.

"She speaks the truth."

Chikondi turned slowly. One of the armed men had emerged from the tent. He was young, maybe twenty-five, with acne scars and eyes that had seen too many orders. He carried his rifle across his chest, but his finger was off the trigger.

"Who are you?" Chikondi asked.

"My name is Gift. I am... I was... a soldier. In the army that no longer exists."

"The same army that buried the cylinders?"

Gift nodded. “My grandfather was there. He was a young man then. They came in trucks at night. They wore masks. They carried the cylinders from a helicopter and lowered them into holes. Two holes. Under two trees. The fig and the baobab. Then they drove away and never came back.”

“Why?”

“Because the regime fell two weeks later. The men who knew the location were killed in the coup. The maps were burned. For forty years, only the trees remembered.”

“And now?”

Gift looked at Wamwayi. “Now she drew the map. From memory. From what she saw when she followed the heron to the hills. She found both holes. And she told us.”

“Us?”

“My grandfather started watching twenty years ago, when he was dying and told me the story. I brought my brothers. We have been here ever since. Keeping the cylinders buried. Keeping strangers away.”

“Until the heron.”

"Until the heron," Gift agreed. "He was not the first. But he was the smartest. He found the girl. He used her. And when she showed him the second cylinder, he decided to sell it to the highest bidder."

"So you killed him."

Gift did not answer. He did not need to.

Chikondi stood up. He looked at Wamwayi. "You were never kidnapped?"

She shook her head. "I followed him. On purpose. I wanted to know why the men were digging. And when I found out, I ran to Gift's camp. The heron followed me. Gift and his brothers tried to stop him. There was a fight. He fell."

"From where?"

"The cliff above the inlet. His neck broke."

Chikondi closed his eyes. A simple story. A terrible story. A story that would make no sense to the villagers, who preferred their tragedies neat, a witch, a murderer, a monster.

He opened his eyes. "The cylinders. Where are they now?"

Gift and Wamwayi exchanged a glance.

“Gone,” said Gift. “Last night. We moved them.”

“Where?”

Wamwayi smiled. It was the smile of someone who had seen too much and decided to laugh anyway.

“We gave them to the lake,” she said. “The deep part. The part where the fish do not swim because the water is too dark. Not even a submarine could find them.”

Chikondi stared at her. Then he laughed. It was a rusty sound, unpractised, like a door opening after years of being locked.

As they prepared to leave, the heavy silence of the hills seemed less like a threat and more like a shared secret, burying the ghosts of a war that time had finally overtaken.

“You are not a child,” he said. “You are a revolution.”

“No,” she said. “I am just a girl who draws.”

The village on trial

Chikondi brought Wamwayi down the mountain.

The village did not celebrate. They stared. They whispered. They pointed at her as though she were a ghost, or a witch, or something worse: a witness.

'She was with the men!'

'She was not taken. She went.'

'She is a spy, like him.'

'She killed the heron!'

'She is possessed!'

The voices swarmed like mosquitoes. Wamwayi did not flinch. She held her blue notebook to her chest and walked through the crowd with her head high. She had drawn the lake. She had drawn the hills. She had drawn the truth. She did not need to draw their approval.

Agogo Miri pushed through the crowd. Her arms were open. She folded Wamwayi into them and held her so tightly that the girl's feet left the ground.

'You are alive', Agogo Miri whispered. 'You are alive, you are alive, you are alive.'

'I am sorry, Grandmother', Wamwayi said. 'I did not mean to frighten you.'

'Frighten me? Child, you have aged me twenty years. But I forgive you. I forgive you everything.'

The crowd did not forgive. They wanted blood. They wanted a confession. They wanted to return to their huts and tell their families that they had been right all along, that the girl was trouble, that the stranger was evil, that the world was exactly as broken as they had always believed.

Dinala the headman stepped forward. He had put

on his ceremonial cloth again. He looked important, which meant he was about to do something stupid.

'Wamwayi', he said, 'you must tell us everything. Where you went. What you did. Who killed the man.'

'I will tell you', she said. 'But you will not believe me.'

'Try us.'

She told them. She told them about the heron, and the map, and the missile. She told them about the cylinders, and the plague, and the grave keepers who had waited forty years. She told them about the fight at the cliff, and the fall, and the lake.

When she finished, the village was silent.

Then Mrs Banda laughed. It was an ugly laugh, the laugh of someone who has decided that the truth is too inconvenient and has chosen a lie instead.

'A plague? Buried under a tree? For forty years? And you expect us to believe that?'

'It is true', said Chikondi.

'You are a spy', spat Mr Jere. 'Liars lie. That is what they do.'

'I am not lying.'

'Then where are these cylinders now? Show us!'

Wamwayi stepped forward. 'They are at the bottom of the lake. In the deep. You cannot see them. You cannot touch them. They are gone.'

'Convenient', said Dinala. 'Very convenient.'

Agogo Miri had had enough. She released Wamwayi and turned to face the crowd. Her voice was not loud, but it cut through the noise like a machete through tall grass.

'You will not speak to her. You will not touch her. You will sit down and hear the truth, or I will put a curse on your yams that lasts seven generations.'

The village sat.

And for the next hour, the truth was told. Not the easy truth, the one with monsters and witches and simple answers. The hard truth. The truth that a twelve-year-old girl had been braver than an entire village. The truth that a foreigner had been murdered not by evil, but by accident. The truth that a weapon had been buried for forty years and had now been

buried again, deeper, where no one would ever find it.

The truth that the village had spent four days accusing each other of crimes they had not committed, because accusing was easier than listening.

'We are ashamed', said Esther finally. She was crying. Esther, who never cried. 'We called her a witch. We called her a whore. We said she ran away because her grandmother beat her. And all along, she was saving us. Saving all of us.'

Wamwayi shook her head. 'I did not save anyone. I just drew what I saw. The lake did the rest.'

The lake, as if in agreement, sent a wave lapping against the shore. The sound was soft, almost gentle.

Dinala the headman removed his ceremonial cloth. He folded it carefully and handed it to Agogo Miri.

'I am not worthy to wear this', he said. 'Not anymore. Find someone else to lead.'

Agogo Miri took the cloth. She looked at it. Then she handed it back.

‘Keep it’, she said. ‘And learn. There is no shame in being wrong. Only in staying wrong.’

Dinala stared at her. Then he nodded. He put the cloth back on. He stood a little taller.

The sun set over Mphanda. For the first time in five days, the cooking fires were lit. The nsima was stirred. The fish was fried. And Wamwayi sat with her grandmother, eating slowly, drawing nothing at all.

The cylinder and the country

Mr Okonkwo returned on the seventh day.

He came alone this time, without the SUV or the driver or the sunglasses. He wore jeans and a T-shirt, and he looked smaller, almost human. He found Chikondi sitting by the lake, mending a net that did not need mending.

'Fisherman,' he said.

'Businessman,' Chikondi replied.

Okonkwo sat down on the rock beside him. For a long time, neither spoke. The lake glittered. A kingfisher dived and emerged with a silver fish.

‘The heron was my brother,’ Okonkwo said finally.

Chikondi’s hands stopped moving. ‘You did not mention that.’

‘Would you have mentioned it?’

‘No.’

‘We were not close. Not for many years. He chose a different path. I chose a different path. But when he went missing, I was the only one who cared enough to look.’

‘And the cylinders? Did you care about those?’

Okonkwo was silent for a moment. Then he laughed, the same dry, hollow laugh from before. ‘No. I cared about the money. There are people who would pay very well for a forty-year-old plague. But the money does not matter now.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because the cylinders are gone. Even if I found them, they are at the bottom of the lake. Salt water. Pressure. They are compromised. Opening them would be suicide. No buyer is that stupid.’

‘You would be surprised.’

Okonkwo shrugged. ‘Perhaps. But I am not going to find out. I am leaving. Tomorrow. Lilongwe, then Lagos, then somewhere else. Somewhere without lakes.’

‘And the girl?’

‘The girl is safe. The girl was always safe. She was never the target. She was the tool. And tools, when they break, you throw them away.’ He stood up. ‘Tell her I am sorry. Not for using her ...I am not sorry for that. I am sorry she saw what she saw. That is a weight she will carry forever.’

Chikondi stood as well. ‘She is stronger than you.’

‘I know.’ Okonkwo smiled, and for a moment, there was something almost genuine in it. ‘That is why I am leaving. If I stayed, she would destroy me.’

He walked away. He did not look back.

Chikondi watched him go. Then he sat down again and resumed mending the net.

Wamwayi appeared from behind a bush. She had been listening. Of course she had.

‘He was not so bad,’ she said. ‘For a liar.’

‘None of them are so bad,’ Chikondi said. ‘That is why they are dangerous.’

She sat beside him. She pulled out her blue notebook and began to draw, not the lake, not the hills, not the face of Mr Okonkwo. She drew a cylinder. Small. Rusted. Sleeping at the bottom of the lake.

‘Why are you drawing that?’ Chikondi asked.

‘Because someone needs to remember,’ she said. ‘For when the lake gives it back.’

‘The lake never gives back.’

‘It gave back the heron.’

Chikondi had no answer for that.

The tongue of the lake

One month later, the fig tree still stood.

Its roots were deep, deeper than anyone knew. Some said they reached all the way to the lake. Some said they held the hills together. Some said that if the fig tree ever fell, Mphanda would fall with it.

The lake was calm. The cassava grew. The fishermen fished. The gossips gossiped. But they gossiped differently now. They said, "Did you hear? The fish are speaking again."

And the fish, they said, had only one word: *Wamwayi*.

She sat on the shore every evening, drawing. Not the cylinders, not the heron, not the men with guns.

She drew the lake. She drew her grandmother. She drew Chikondi, mending his net, his limp less pronounced now, his eyes less haunted.

"What will you draw next?" he asked one evening.

She looked up at the sky. The first stars were appearing, faint and trembling, like the lights of a distant village.

"A heron," she said. "Flying away."

He nodded. "That is a good lie."

"It is not a lie," she said. "It is a story. And stories are the only truth that does not drown."

She put pencil to paper and began to draw. The heron rose from the page, neck long, wings wide, flying toward a horizon that did not exist. Behind it, the lake glittered. The hills stood like clenched fists, slowly relaxing.

Agogo Miri called from the hut. "Wamwayi! Nsima is ready!"

"Coming, Grandmother!"

She closed the notebook. She stood up. She looked

at Chikondi, and he looked at her, and neither of them said what they were thinking: that the lake was old, that the cylinders were still down there, that one day someone would come looking again. Someone always came looking.

But that was tomorrow. And tomorrow had its own stories.

Tonight, there was nsima. There was fish. There was a grandmother who loved her. And there was a blue notebook, heavy with drawings, heavy with secrets, waiting for the next page.

Wamwayi walked back to the village. The path was dark, but she did not need light. She had drawn this path a hundred times. She knew every twist, every root, every shadow.

Behind her, the lake breathed.

And somewhere, in the deep, the cylinders dreamed of a world without hands to open them.

THE END

The man who walked like a heron

Nneka Solomon

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altered or selectively extracted by any means
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He was tall. Too tall. His legs were long as herons' legs.

THE MAN WHO WALKED LIKE A HERON

Nneka Solomon, part-time educator full-time chronicler of small-town life, spends her days navigating the unpredictable waters of academia and her evenings crafting fantastical tales where the local gossip mill becomes a cauldron of magical intrigue and the town square transforms into a bustling marketplace for enchanted wares.

Nneka Solomon